

Letter F

19 September 1699

Bouvet to Leibniz

(AA I xvii N. 296)

at Peking this 19th September 1699

Monsieur,

You know that before leaving France to return here I replied so succinctly and confusedly to the extensive and learned letter which you honored me by writing,¹ that I do not believe myself to be released thereby from the obligation which your courtesy has placed on me to try, as much as is in my power and with the help of my associates, to satisfy your worthy desires on most of the matters which you took the trouble to propose to me. And but for my having been extremely distracted and occupied without rest with several affairs which were the necessary consequences of my voyage, I would now be working to give you the satisfaction you wish on the points that do not demand so lengthy a study.

Father de Fontaney,² leader of our first group and formerly professor of mathematics at our college in Paris, whom the emperor of China presently is sending

¹ Letter B.

² Jean de Fontaney (1643-1710) led the first official French mission to China (see Letter E, n. 9) which included Bouvet. The mission arrived in Beijing just ten days after the death of Verbiest (see Letter B, n. 32), who had initiated the request for such a mission. Fontaney, was trained in Mathematics and Astronomy like the others in the mission,

back to France on the same ship that brought me back here along with a recruitment of ten able missionaries of our company³ who reached China with me after seven months of a very calm and very fortunate sail, this father, I repeat, to whom I introduced your great and praiseworthy designs, will not fail on arriving to give himself the honor of writing you, and informing you either immediately on his own or by way of Father Verjus or Father Le Gobien,⁴ as I have requested, of the news from China which he brings with

and taught at the Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris. He brought Bouvet's letter with him on his return trip to France in 1700. Leibniz initiated his own correspondence with Fontaney while the latter was in Europe. Fontaney returned to China in 1702 with eight new missionaries, but had to leave a year later, a victim of the Rites Controversy. Several years after his return to Europe (including a stay in London), he was appointed Rector of Collège La Flèche. Leibniz continued to correspond with him to elicit further information about the languages, geography, etc. of China and its environs. For more on Fontaney, see L. Pfister, Notices biographiques. . ., pp. 419-433.

³ In addition to the eight mentioned earlier (see Letter E, n. 3), two more Jesuits had joined them later at the Cape of Good Hope: Jean Domenge (1666-1735) and Ignace-Gabriel Baborier (1663-1727). See Letter C, n. 2. for the various accounts of the voyages of the Jesuits to China on the *Amphitrite*.

⁴ Le Gobien indeed does write Leibniz from Paris (AA I xviii: N. 225), detailing Bouvet's return to China. When Bouvet arrived in Canton, he was treated as the representative of the Emperor and given official VIP treatment all along the way to Beijing.

him, at least of that [news] in which you might be most interested. The accounts which Father Gerbillon gave him of his different travels in Tartary⁵ will serve greatly to satisfy your curiosity concerning the history and the geography of these regions, and will enable you to decide whether Monsieur Witsen's map has some precision in the position of the lands which it depicts to the east.⁶

As to our intended designs in working for the conversion of the Chinese, of drawing from this nation all that can serve toward the perfection of our sciences and our arts in order to communicate it to our scholars, inasmuch as we had already formed for ourselves nearly the same plan that you have proposed, to which the diversity of occupations which we have had until now has prevented us, the few that we are, from seriously applying ourselves: what we have been able to do until now is far too little.

⁵ Gerbillon (see Letter of 2 December 1697, n. 20) accompanied the K'ang Hsi Emperor on many of his expeditions into Tartary and wrote accounts of them. See A. Rowbotham, Missionary and Mandarin . . ., p. 100. In his letter to Leibniz of 18 February, Le Gobien talks in particular of "a very accurate map and faithful account of the eleven voyages that . . . Gerbillon undertook into Tartary. . . This Reverend Father tells me that all of Tartary pays obeisance to the Emperor of China." (AA I xviii: N. 225, postscript.) The Leibniz-Bouvet file in the Leibniz Archives in Hannover has a selection of 40 pages of an Italian translation of Gerbillon's observations on Tartary, taken from du Halde, Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'Empire de la Chine (La Haye: Scheurleer, 1736), IV 37-70. (LBr 105: 67-88).

⁶ On Witsen's map, see Letter B, n. 11.

Now that our group has been multiplied fourfold this year by the fortunate arrival of all my comrades, [including] even the five who had left before me to come here by way of the ships of the Indies,⁷ and that those here first are now masters of the language, I hope that from this time on there will be seen some fruits of our small labors.

I beseeched Father Visdelou, who of all the missionaries is the one who has the best understanding of Chinese books and characters and who is no less conversant in all of our European sciences, to work first on the critique which you so judiciously believe necessary for judging the Chinese histories, as well as on the literary history. This Father has already long since started to work on a new dictionary which, when finished, will leave nothing to be desired in this subject by the curious and the learned.⁸ It was in order to work more freely on this project and on various others, that at the arrival of the new comrades whom I brought, of whom the emperor retained five for his service,⁹ this Father requested permission of his majesty to withdraw into the provinces, where he went two months ago.

I do not promise you that one will find there a key to the Chinese characters, at least such as that of the late Monsieur Mullerus which you mention to me, unless this

⁷ These five are the Jesuit Fathers J. Dominge, J.-G. Baborier, F.-X. d'Entrecolles (1664-1741), and J.-F. Foucquet (1665-1741) as well as Brother P. Frapperie (1664-1703). See L. Pfister, *Notices biographiques*, p. 434, n. 1. (AA I xvii: 491, n. to line 15).

⁸ On Visdelou, Letter E, n. 9.

⁹ According to Rowbotham (*Missionary and Mandarin . . .*, p. 107, n. 12), the five Jesuits remaining in Beijing were Pernon, Regis, Parennin as well as two of the later arrivals, François-Xavier d'Entrecolles and Jean-François Foucquet.

were to be a key that would be in common with the Egyptian characters / hieroglyphs, which I believe on likely enough conjecture to be completely similar in their origin.¹⁰

I have long since planned to make a small vocabulary of the neighboring languages [of China], just as I have started one for the languages of Siam, Pegu [i.e., Lower Burma], and Cambodia, and the Bali language.¹¹ The emperor is at present having work done on a Manchu Tartar and Chinese dictionary, the translation of which will give all at once the knowledge of these two languages. The Manchu Tartar language, which presently is the dominant language in this empire, has an affinity to that of the Mugals or occidental Tartars [i.e., Mongols] in both its words and its script.¹²

As to Chinese chronology, I do not know anyone more capable of establishing it than Father Visdelou, about whom I spoke to you here above. He is completely incapable of betraying his conscience or of acting in bad faith in this matter, and should be able to work successfully on it [i.e., the Chinese chronology] right away if he so wishes, and it will not be difficult to persuade him of it, and perhaps after that on the history of the dynasties and on the history of the inventions of the arts, the sciences, and laws, which I believe along

¹⁰On Müller, see Letter B, n. 8. Once again, Bouvet affirms his belief in the similarity between the Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Chinese characters (as he did in Letter E).

¹¹No evidence of such a work is currently extant.

¹²The Tartar-Manchu language was the language of the rulers and at this time was still the official language for most court documents to and from the emperor, but Mandarin Chinese was widely used for most official work, and in any case Chinese in one form or another was by far the most widely spoken language of the empire.

with the Chinese themselves to have been more perfect at the beginning of their monarchy than at present, although I have reason to doubt whether they themselves were the inventors [of the laws], or rather the ancient Patriarchs of all nations, from whom it seems they [i.e., the Chinese] inherit all they have of value in this matter, without ever having improved on much excepting the laws which are for the most ordinary customs of life.¹³

If this same Father, who alone could fully satisfy your curiosity on all that you wish with the knowledge he possesses of the learned books of China, begins this year—as he has planned—to work on translating the Chinese code, or the summary of the laws by which this whole empire has been governed with an admirable uniformity for so many centuries, you will have the pleasure of seeing the most beautiful body of jurisprudence that can be imagined, and in which our most able statesmen will find much to learn.¹⁴

¹³ Bouvet repeats his belief on the superior intelligence of those closer to Creation (see Letter E, nn. 12 and 24). He develops his “Figurism” further here: he concedes the higher truth of vaunted Chinese practical wisdom, but claims that it ultimately was derived from the Ancient Lawgiver (Hermes Trismegistus/Thoth/Moses et al.) who originated in the Near East. His earlier remarks on the sources of Chinese characters (from Egyptian hieroglyphs) and his comments below on the non-Chinese origin of their culture highlight Bouvet’s firm belief in the derivative quality of all the “arts, the sciences and laws” of China.

¹⁴ There is some truth in Bouvet’s comment about the antiquity and continuity of “the Chinese code”, due to a methodological and functional conservatism in the various revisions of the Chinese legal codes and statutes through the centuries. The formulation

Although their speculative mathematics are by far neither so profound nor so perfect, as you have well noticed, you are surely right to say that the long experience they have in putting things into practice has taught them many secrets and convenient practices on diverse matters whose collection, towards which we hope that each of us may work at his convenience, could greatly enrich our arts and experimental sciences. We are going to assign someone from among us to bring together everything possible of

of legal statutes was a dynastic project since the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), and the extensive Tang dynasty code, first promulgated in 624, to a large extent remained at the core of subsequent compendia over the next millennia. The Great Ming Code (Da Ming lüli 大明律例), finalized in 1397, was the basis of the early Qing legal system, and its revision underlay the first Qing dynasty code in 1646 (enacted in 1647), the Da Qing lü jijie fu li 大清律集解附例 (Laws of the Great Qing with collected commentaries and appended statutes). A Manchu version was published ten years later. Bouvet may be referring to the 1644 code, but in any case it does not appear that Visdelou completed his translation of “the Chinese code”. On the Chinese legal codes, see John W. Head and Yanping Wang, Law Codes In Dynastic China: A Synopsis Of Chinese Legal History In The Thirty Centuries From Zhou To Qing (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005). On the Qing code, see Zheng Qin, “Pursuing Perfection: Formation of the Qing Code,” trans. by Guangyuan Zhou, Modern China XXI (1995): 310-344; William C. Jones, ed. and trans., The Great Qing Code (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); and Xiangyu Hu, “The Juridical System of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing (1644-1900)”, PhD Diss., University of Minnesota, 2011.

the ancient astronomical observations, in order to supply learned persons like you with the means to extract from them the great benefits which you point out.

Father de Fontaney, as I mentioned above, is bringing back the means by which we can correct and supplement Monsieur Witsen's map with regard to that section of Tartary which extends along the whole northern region with respect to China, and even further, as much to the west as to the east. If God hearkens to my longstanding prayers to obtain the liberty to make some excursions in the rest of eastern Tartary, as far as the sea which borders the continent to the east where as far as I know no one as yet has brought the faith, I will not fail to inform you of the observations and reports which I will make, God helping, in this region. And perhaps I will be fortunate enough to give you some more precise facts of the land of Yezo [i.e., Hokkaido] and of the so-called Strait of Anian [i.e., Bering Strait], which you might not be expecting from me.

As soon as the new missionaries whom I brought with me have solidly studied the Chinese characters for two years, to which they are now applying themselves, one or two at least will be assigned to put into European language the principal books of medicine of the Chinese and especially their natural history, which is a repertory of an infinity of recipes and secrets that should be able to lead our natural philosophers and physicians to some other even more notable discoveries.

Whatever eagerness we all might have to become involved in your designs, and myself in particular, it is difficult due to the confusion we find ourselves in this year of, in addition to the occupations we have here in the service of the emperor and the ministry of the gospel, attending to several new establishments in various provinces and

instructing our new comrades who are still novices in the Chinese customs and ceremonies; it is difficult, I was saying, for us to begin this year the work of sending you the preliminary briefs which you desire on each matter while awaiting larger works.

I have performed the duty you requested of me with respect to Father Grimaldi. I believe he will respond to it himself.¹⁵

The emperor of China set great value on the astronomical machines of Monsieur Romer's invention¹⁶ which we presented to him twelve years ago on our arrival, and as a mark of the esteem in which he held them, for they had been very well preserved, he had them placed in one of the principal rooms of his palace on either side of his throne as one of the most handsome ornaments of that place, where I saw them still only three days ago.

In order to satisfy the desire which you have to know what was brought from China to France and from France to China, I will tell you in regard to the last point that we brought there all sorts of refined mathematical instruments, large and small; telescopes of all sizes; various kinds of microscopes; clocks, both the repeating pendulum variety and those for astronomical observations, on an inclined plane; musical instruments; large and small mirrors; marquetry works; some of our best engravings, all

¹⁵ Other than a short letter to Leibniz in 1693 from Goa (AA I ix: N. 421), Grimaldi never corresponded directly with him. He usually handed Leibniz's requests over to a knowledgeable third party who would answer them. Leibniz included Grimaldi's letter in his *Novissima Sinica* (AA IV vi 443-444). On Grimaldi, see Letter B, n. 7.

¹⁶ On Rømer and his "machines," see Letter B, n. 29.

sorts of curiosities of chemistry and physics; glassworks; lathes and other interesting machines; some of our best specific remedies; some of our seeds from the royal botanical garden; diverse sorts of gems and artificial pearls, and other similar jewelry more of interest for the delicacy of work than for their material; and finally a large number of our best books. As to that which we brought from China to France, they are more ordinary things and less interesting in proportion. If you except several choice books, of which I believe you were sent the list [of titles],¹⁷ along with some paintings; some of their best drugs, such as ginseng and tea from the emperor's cup; some of their jewels; some pieces of brocade, of satin and other sorts; as well as some pieces of porcelain with dragons for the emperor's use; some white wax that approaches alabaster for its hardness and its whiteness, made on trees by worms; some musical instruments; some of their ink; some paper of eleven or twelve feet in length per sheet, from the time of the family / dynasty of the Ming; some works of lacquer; samples of many kinds of drugs unknown in Europe; and several kinds of their seeds; except for these things the remainder are not worthy of mention. But we fully expect at a later time to extract from the Chinese other things much more useful to Europe, so as not to become inferior to them by so freely imparting to them our best information, in order to take advantage of the good advice that you give us.

¹⁷ Such a list has not been found among the items that Bouvet deposited with the Library in Paris. On the books Bouvet deposited in the library, see Letter A, n. 7; M. Cohen, "A Point of History".

However universally I esteem all of the points of your letter, the one which moreso pleased me as the most conforming to my particular opinion is the part where you speak of philosophy and where you indicate how important it is—if we wish to introduce that of Europe to China as a very fitting means to dispose their minds to receive the gospel, which is the true wisdom—to not make use of modern philosophy, unless it be to enrich it and embellish it, but [to use] ancient philosophy, whose principles surely are in themselves more solid and even more consonant with the ideas of the true philosophy of the ancient Chinese, and consequently more fitting towards bringing them to the understanding of supernatural philosophy.¹⁸ And principally for this reason I would have

¹⁸ Bouvet here develops Leibniz's remarks in Letter A about rehabilitating ancient philosophy, keying it into his own strategy of converting the Chinese. By pointing out the superiority of ancient philosophy over modern philosophy and then demonstrating to the Chinese that their ancient natural philosophy or theology is close to that of the Christian West, the Chinese adoption of Christianity would simply be an affirmation of their own, earlier heritage. Thus Bouvet senses here that Leibniz could be a strong ally in his efforts to convert the Chinese by using his Hermetic/Figurist doctrines (See Letter E, nn. 11-12).

While not accepting the historical or linguistic bases of these doctrines (usually called Ancient Theology), Leibniz appreciated the strategic use of such a view and supported Bouvet's efforts. (For more on Leibniz's attitude towards Ancient Theology, see D. J. Cook, "Leibniz, China and the Problem of Pagan Wisdom." Indeed, in a later piece on Chinese thought, entitled "On the Civil Cult of Confucius" (CR 63-64; AA IV viii: 397-398), Leibniz defends Bouvet's interpretation of ancient Chinese sources as not unlike

extremely liked during my stay in Europe to have had several hours of conversation with you on this subject had I been able to have the good fortune of seeing you. I might well at some later time, when I may have a bit more leisure, give myself the honor of writing you more at length on this subject, if you agree to permit me to consult you as a great master in this matter as well as in all others.

As I was on the point of departure when I received your last letter I did not respond at all, it seems to me, to the section where you were mentioning the chronological book printed by Monsieur Menzelius, it being to no purpose to respond to it at that time.¹⁹ As for ginseng, while waiting for me to send some more specific information on it, you can tell Monsieur Menzelius that this root grows principally in Korea and in Liaodong.²⁰ That of Liaodong is the most excellent. The best is for the

the Christian use of the Hebrew Bible in order to convert the Jews. See CR: 63-64.

Leibniz often defended classical and scholastic learning on philosophical grounds, especially against the Cartesians' anti-historical views (see Letter B, nn. 33-34), but he also championed the importance of earlier learning on polemical grounds as well, e.g., in his fight against those thinkers and doctrines he saw as undermining Christianity and encouraging doctrines conducive to atheism and libertinism (AA I ii: 66-67).

¹⁹Letter D. On Menzelius, see Letter C, n. 4.

²⁰Liaodong generally has referred to the area east of the Liao River in present day Liaoning Province, from the eastern shores of the Liaodong Bay across to the border with Korea, i.e., principally the Liaodong Peninsula. Verbiest's map of 1644, which likely represented Bouvet's understanding of the geography of northeastern China at the time, marks "Liaodong" as this peninsula and a part of the strip of land on the northern shore of

emperor's consumption. It also grows in some places in China, but it is inferior even to that of Korea.

Liaodong Bay. See Verbiest's "Complete World Map" (Kun yu quan tu 坤輿全圖), in Cao Wanru, et al., eds., Zhongguo gudai dituji, Qing dai; An Atlas of Ancient Maps in China, The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) (Beijing: Wenwu, Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1997), Plate 144. Bouvet himself was appointed by the emperor 1708 as joint leader along with his fellow Jesuits Jean-Baptiste Régis (1663-1738) and Petrus (Pierre) Jartoux (1668-1720) to survey the regions along the northeast sections of the Great Wall of China; Bouvet was reluctant to go and returned from the group expedition early after falling from a horse. Régis and Jartoux went on to lead a large-scale imperial surveying project, culminating in a fifty-map atlas presented to the emperor in 1718, the "Huang yu quan lan tu" 皇輿全覽圖, a great advance in trigonometrical cartography that was later published in Europe. Jartoux was introduced to ginseng on this expedition, and wrote the first account of ginseng by a Westerner; this account, originally a letter dated 12 April 1711, was published in the Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London: (1713; pp. 237-247) as "The Description of a Tartarian Plant, Call'd Gin-Seng; with an Account of Its Virtues." In this detailed account, which includes precise drawings and his own personal experience of the virtues of the plant, he wrote that it is found: "... between the thirty ninth and forty seventh degree of northern latitude, and between the tenth and twentieth degree of eastern longitude, reckoning from the meridian of Peking..."

I wrote a few words to your friend Father Kochanski while waiting until I had the leisure to respond to the questions which he proposed to me.²¹ I am taking the liberty to superscribe his letter to you. I sent to M. Scrokus in Batavia the letter which you had superscribed to me for him.²² I only could send it from Canton, for having missed the Sunda Strait on our way we were not able to land in passing at Batavia.²³ I only have left enough paper necessary to renew my first avowals of esteem and profound respect for you, with which I am

Monsieur,

Your very humble and very obedient
servant in J.C. J. Bouvet J.

²¹See Bouvet's letter to Kochanski, WB 240-243.

²²Bouvet means the letter from (not to) Schrokus to Andreas Cleyer in Java (Batavia).
See Letter D, nn. 3-4.

²³The Sunda Strait is between Java and Sumatra, connecting the Java Sea and the Indian Ocean.

